

Becoming A “Real” Dyke

Employment and Housing

BY RUE AMANA

Every “real” dyke’s dream, you have probably heard, is to get out of the city, obtain a little piece of serene northern countryside, preferably with a cozy little cabin on it, bake bread (from scratch), do square-foot gardening (from scratch), and keep the fire burning — with wood preferably selected from one’s own trees, chopped by oneself and of course strictly adhering to all environmentally approved criteria.

The Orillia Experience

In an effort to learn how to become a “real” dyke, I backed out of my lease and the new car deal I had just made, and decided to “go for it.” Toronto was rapidly losing its appeal for me anyway. At my work place, both of my bosses were being pressured to resign. One of them, who happened to be a lesbian, subsequently moved north herself, setting up a jam business and becoming my role model “real” dyke.

I decided to accept an administrative position in Orillia at the General Hospital, not withstanding the warnings I received concerning my boss-to-be. I borrowed \$5,000 from my father’s inheritance and bought that little piece of the North, winterized cottage and all.

The cottage was located in what I call cottage “suburbia” — not quite prerequisites for a “real” dyke, but I regarded it as a step in the right direction. I purchased the cottage for \$36,000 and paid the required 10 per cent down. What a nerve-wracking, exciting experience!

I had never looked after a house before and knew nothing of septic systems, wells, wood stove maintenance, metal roofs, winter condensation problems, property upkeep or heaving driveways. The moment my offer was in, the realization of my lack of knowledge concerning all these things flooded my mind, leaving me wide-eyed for days.

“Water pump? Oh yes, I realize it’s an old one; yes, I can see that.” I had never seen one before in my life, new or old. In fact, I had no knowledge of their existence at all.

“Well, looking after it is quite simple: all you have to do is prime it once in a while. It’s easy, just shut this off, and turn that on and, oh yes, be careful not to electrocute yourself.”

My goddess, what had I done? I was beginning to know real panic, an emotion I had seldom experienced, except perhaps the day I got married.

At any rate, all went along swimmingly — I learned what I needed to know, usually the hard way. At first, I tried to do everything myself (except cut down trees and chop wood — I’m not crazy!). I cut the grass (a major chore on a 75-foot by 150-foot uneven lot, and given I am quite allergic to grass), grew a little square foot garden, shovelled snow (another huge chore with a 75-foot gravel driveway), tried to get the snow off the roof (even though I am terrified of heights), changed my own flat tires, and fixed my own mailbox when it got pushed over (one of the favorite pastimes of country kids). It almost killed me, but I did it — for a little while.

One wintry day, my neighbour appeared with his snow blower and kept my driveway clear for me from then on. I could have kissed him! Another neighbour arrived with his bulldozer and levelled my heaving driveway for me. A neighbourhood boy with a riding mower agreed to do the lawn. Yet another neighbour put a valve on my water pump, making that job a breeze. Life was a little easier for a while. The one major job that no one offered to do for me was to stack the wood, but I really could not complain.

After two and a half years of being a sensible suburban dyke, I was forced to resign my position at the hospital, apparently because hospital authorities had become suspicious of my “sexual orientation.” Orillia is known for its homophobia, as the Opera House scandal, a few years before my arrival, had clearly indicated. The House’s washrooms had been raided at intermission and the “found-ins” (except for certain Orillian notables), were charged.

The Hospital Administrator told me that he felt I did not “fit into the patchwork of Orillia.” I asked him to clarify his words, explaining that I felt I was part of it — after all I owned property, belonged to the golf course and was on two local boards. He could only repeat his accusation, several times, with an air of pity. As there was no human rights legislation in existence at that time to govern discrimination on the basis of one’s sexuality, I decided to take the settlement and go. That was a mistake, I decided after the shock had subsided six months later.

The "River" Experience

I realized that my cottage had to go up for sale. I was determined, however, to keep something in the North, for I had truly come to love life outside of Toronto — my wood stove, my garden and the freedom home ownership in the country allowed me and my two dogs and three cats.

The property sold for \$45,000. From that, I managed to purchase a 30-foot park model trailer, make a downpayment on a new truck (a reliable vehicle was an absolute necessity if my plan was to work), and secure a mortgage on eight acres of land located twenty minutes east of the Bracebridge Town Centre, bordered by 1750 feet of the Black River. This is where my "real" dyke tale truly begins.

The challenge then was — how could I make the contents of a two-bedroom cottage fit into a 30-foot by 8-foot trailer that already had some furniture in it? I had already sold several items just to survive and had given away many others. As my new home had no hydro or water, and no storage space — in fact, no space at all to speak of — all items that were not essential had to go.

However, I still ended up with what seemed like endless amounts of "stuff." Even when we think we are living a simple life (as I thought of my cottage life in Orillia) how utterly and completely complex it is! Space, and the absence of hydro and water, forced me to realize this invaluable lesson.

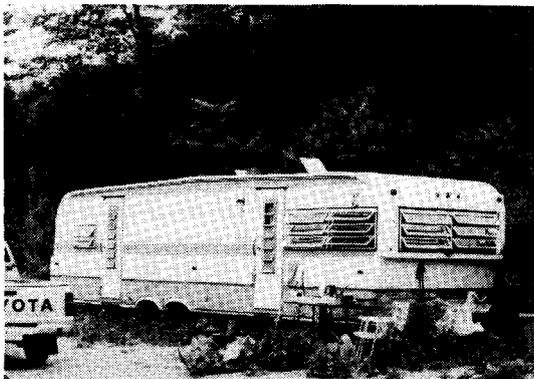
The Vision

My first time I spent at the "river" was basically hell on earth. It was May when I moved. How was I to know that the day I selected to do my under-the-trailer plumbing would be the same day that every black fly in the county would be under there with me? But such minor problems as severe heat, claustrophobia and hordes of black flies are nothing to the "real" dyke, right? Digging the four-foot deep by two-foot wide hole and organizing the oil barrel (with holes in the bottom for drainage) by myself in preparation for this final step meant that nothing, not even black flies, could stop me now.

The trailer had a toilet in it and I was determined to make it work. This was my vision. And with it came my next great realization. Never listen to

people who do not have first-hand experience with the thing you want to know about. This was a lesson I was to learn over and over until finally, I realized that often it was best to do my own research and apply my own intuition to a situation. When you have to do it, you do it — no neighbours to get me out of this one!

The toilet system worked not badly for a few weeks. Of course, I still had to haul water from the river to put in the tank so that the toilet could be flushed. The problem with the "system" was twofold. First, even though there were holes in the bottom of the barrel, toilet paper and human waste forms sludge that does not drain well. There are supposedly environmentally safe products that can be put in the system to help this problem, but take my word for it, they do not work well



enough. And these products smell even worse than the problem itself. Secondly, I wondered whether the system was really environmentally sound. I was about 150 feet from the river, but I was never sure whether or not any of the contents of the barrel (which was four feet down in the porous, sandy ground) managed to seep into the river.

I decided to change to a modified out-house system. This involved digging another four-foot deep by three-foot wide hole. The hole was covered, except for an opening to allow waste to be dumped. A large plastic garbage can with the bottom cut out of it was placed upside down over the opening. I put the garbage can lid on top of it and used a log to keep the lid from blowing away, allowing for easy access in the winter.

I used a bowl in the toilet inside the trailer and then dumped it outside. This system worked quite well, and I felt slightly better about its environmental safety. However, every spring for about three

days, instead of being a safe 150-foot distance from the river, the margin narrows to about 75 feet. The next hole I dig will take this problem into account.

Space and Freedom

The limited amount of space in the trailer, which was filled with far too much "stuff," drove me crazy at the beginning. I could not seem to move without crashing into something. This was so frustrating, and such a major adjustment, that I would often let out a blood-curdling scream. But it led to yet another major discovery — this was the first place where I had ever lived that I could yell and scream. The isolation and outside space around me more than compensated for the lack of space inside and I soon began to love the freedom that came with my new "space."

Water at Last!

After hauling water from the river in pails for the first few months, another major feat was the installation of a hand pump. Suddenly, there was water available right outside my door. Putting it all together by myself was very buggy, hot, awkward and difficult. But the joy I felt when I saw water coming out of the pump is indescribable.

The Paper Woman

I had decided that I could not face another conventional job for a long time, maybe never. I had always wanted to work for a newspaper. And so, when a local restaurant changed hands and announced its grand opening, I decided to cover the story. I wrote up a nice little piece with pictures. I took it to the *Muskoka Sun* in Bracebridge. They used it, much to my delight.

"You do understand that we don't pay for the privilege to publish in our paper?" My heart sank momentarily, but I asked if they had any paid work. I ended up delivering the *Muskoka Sun* to all of Bracebridge, and the neighbouring towns of Bala and Gravenhurst.

Delivering the papers almost killed me but it too had a useful outcome. I got some badly needed upper body strength that came in very handy, especially in the

winter when one snowfall of two or three feet left me with hours of work, shovelling the laneway with the heavy salted snow from the highway blocking the entrance. And then there was the impossible-to-avoid job of raking the roof after each and every heavy snowfall. Some nights I would arrive home at 10 p.m. after working on the paper all day, drive through a blizzard (as I lived twenty minutes from the town centre), only to be faced with hours of shovelling before my truck could be safely parked. I certainly slept well those nights!

Delivering the papers to all of Muskoka also kept me in touch with the "people." I seemed to get to know everything that was happening, or about to happen, in the countryside. It was wonderful — I had a reason to ask all those questions you always want to, but dare not.

It was a real trip. I also got to do some proofreading/editing, ad work and pasteup as well as having my own column called "All About Muskoka," in the *Muskoka Advance*. As well, I did some writing for *Muskoka Focus on Business*, the *Muskoka Sun* (my favorite), and the *Herald Gazette*. I was invited to join three community Boards as a result of my column and received a great deal of wonderful mail from the readers. I loved it — but the pay was too low to finance even my humble lifestyle due to a backlog of old debts.

Summer Passes

The summer at the river was so easy in so many ways once I had a few things organized. Light and heat were not a problem. I woke up with the sun and went to bed at sunset. I washed my clothes by hand, bathed in the river, picked berries, had campfires, and meals out doors, and watched the sky and stars at night (replacing TV). I was comfortable and happy, and so were my animals.

As the nights got colder and the days got shorter, the challenges began to increase. I used kerosene for all my light and heating needs. I was not sure that two kerosene heaters would be adequate to get me through those -30°C days and nights

that were an inevitability.

Amazingly, I got through my first winter at the river with that heating system. Some nights I would arrive home and the heat would be off. But once I got the heat back on and got all wrapped up in my down blanket and sleeping bag with a dog on either side of me and the cats covering the rest of me, I never had cold feet.

Only one day gave me cause to wonder if it were wise to stay there over night. The temperature plummeted to -35°C and everything was frozen solid, including the truck. Fortunately, I didn't have to go anywhere that day, so my animals and I went back to bed until the day warmed up a little.



Back to Toronto

By February, it was clear that I had to get a paying job to help solve my money problems. Casey House Hospice for People with AIDS was my choice, even though it meant returning to Toronto.

I commuted and stayed with friends from March to January. Three car accidents later (one caused by a deer, and two by weather conditions) made me determined to get a place in Toronto. I was not at all ready to leave the North, though. It will always be in my blood.

In mid-January, I found a place on Queen Street near the water treatment plant. It was perfect for my dog, Boo (the other had drowned in the winter at the river), and two cats, Mikey and Ralph. However, two weeks after I moved in, I received notice that the landlord had decided to evict everyone with dogs. I left at the end of July. I had also left Casey

House and was still plagued with money problems.

Undaunted, I returned to the river for August. I soon found another place in Toronto closer to downtown where I was told pets were welcome. I was still moving in when I was informed that pets were in fact not allowed and that I might be facing eviction again (the landlord had the notice in his hand when he came to collect my second month's rent). I mentioned that my rent would always be paid by certified cheques. After carefully examining the cheque, he smiled and said we would let it go for now. Re-entry into the Big City has not gone too smoothly.

Since leaving Casey House, I have been doing private duty nursing for People Living With AIDS (PLWA) and have established an AIDS Home Care Service Steering Committee. This service will focus on the 93 per cent of PLWA who cannot afford to be cared for at home. We hope to be fully funded by the Ministry of Health.

The lessons of the river — returning to the basics of food, shelter, water, heat, the stars, the sight of moose and deer outside my window, the blue heron sitting in the lily pond, the chattering

of the beavers, the wolves howling, mother bear and her cubs crossing the road, the turtles hatching, the fresh crisp winter air, the sunsets, the trees and totems, the ever-changing river, the forest, the solitude, the time to focus on all that truly matters — they will always beckon me. I survived in that environment because I became a part of it and it became a part of me — a symbiosis unknown to most city dwellers. I am still out of step in the City. There is so little freedom — I can't even scream without attracting unwanted attention!

Housing and employment have been, and continue to be, central challenges in my life. I think I can honestly say that I have earned the title of "real" dyke.

Rue Amana is presently managing a Toronto-based housing program for people with mental health or addiction related problems, who may be HIV positive or living with AIDS.